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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003488

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SUBJECT: PRINCE OF THE MARSHES ON SOFA AND MAYSAN,S FUTURE

Classified By: PRT Leader Dan Foote, Reasons 1.4b,d

11. (U) This is a Maysan PRT reporting cable.

12. (C/REL MCFI) Summary: In a wide-ranging discussion, prominent Maysani Sheikh Abed al-Kareem al-Mohammedawi of "Prince of the Marshes" fame explained that he was pitching the SOFA to local and tribal leaders to counter attempts by Iran and others to distort the agreement. He said that Iraqi leaders were under great pressure from Iran to not sign the agreement, and that those opposed to the agreement see it as an opportunity to inflict defeat on the U.S. He raised ongoing threats to stability including criminal elements, mass unemployment, and continuing influence of militias in Iraqi politics. Sheikh Abed criticized Baghdad leaders for being out of touch and characterized them as making uninformed decisions. He cautioned that making "arrests based on poor intelligence" would only create more enemies. He recommended that the USG must appeal to easily impressionable Iraqis on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Sheikh Abed was engaging, gracious, and humorous, and welcomed further engagement with the PRT and CF. End Summary.

Iran Trying Its Best to Derail SOFA

13. (C/REL MCFI) In an October 28 meeting in his office in downtown Amarah on the banks of the Tigris River, Sheikh Abed al-Kareem al-Mohammedawi, also known as Abu Hatem and popularized as the title figure in "The Prince of the Marshes" (a book by former CPA member Rory Stewart), told Team Leader and 2-7 Cavalry Battalion Commanding Officer (CO) that he was actively seeking out tribal and local leaders to discuss the draft SOFA to counter "people who are trying to distort the agreement." He said his mission is to explain it fairly. Specifically mentioning engagements with Sunni bloc leaders in Baghdad, he said he had asked their opinions and "provided background information to prove them wrong." He confirmed that Iraqi leaders are feeling great pressure from Iran to not sign the agreement. Citing the Soviets' demise following the war with Afghanistan, he explained that SOFA opponents see this as a similar opportunity to deal the U.S. a defeat that will ultimately lead to its departure.

Transition to Democracy Will Be Slow

14. (C/REL MCFI) Using one of many analogies, Sheikh Abed told us that Iraq - like a teenager who is as not quite an adult but certainly no longer a child - is experiencing a myriad of changes. He said that as a result, the transition to democracy in Iraq will take a long time. In Sheikh Abed's opinion, even the current Iraqi leadership who opposed Saddam suffers from what afflicted Saddam - the mentality that it must have power to achieve gains versus democratic representation. To lose power is to lose stability, he said, adding that "they still think like Baathists" and have resorted to stealing and other corruptive measures to retain control, which has increased instability.

Destabilizing Factors Still Prevalent

¶5. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed cited massive unemployment, criminal elements, a restive youth population, and the continuing influence of militias in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as major obstacles to progress. He boasted that he had rightly predicted that unless removed from the political process, militias would complicate things greatly. He insisted that militias still wield considerable influence within both the Iraqi Police (IP) and Iraqi Army (IA). He referred to the Ministry of Interior as having nine floors - one for each of the political parties and militias.

More Transparent Contracting/Budget Execution Needed

¶6. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed complained at length about the mechanism for reconstruction assistance and how funding has been directed to corrupt individuals. He said there is a desperate need for a more transparent process for issuing project contracts and executing budgets. He commented that he was more optimistic now that the PRT has begun operations inside the province versus solely from Tallil Air Base in Dhi Qar province.

Baghdad Leadership Out of Touch

¶7. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed characterized the Iraqi leadership in Baghdad as out of touch and cited poor communication in the interagency process as the catalyst for

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many mistakes and uninformed decision making. He complained that most of the leadership had never left the safety of the Green Zone, and implied that leaders must get out into the country in order to adequately understand and positively affect the issues.

Avoid False Arrests

¶8. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed cautioned that in the current charged environment, political opponents continuously levy false accusations against one another, and that the U.S. must avoid making arrests based on poor intelligence and faulty sources. To illustrate, he told us a story of a king that ordered his soldiers to kill all the foxes in the forest. When the retreating foxes encountered a camel, the camel became very worried that he would be mistaken for a fox and killed if he was unable to convince the king's soldiers that he indeed was a camel. Sheikh Abed laughed, and said, "this is how people feel in Amarah; they are afraid that they will be falsely accused of crimes or associations with criminal groups and will be unable to convince the authorities that they are innocent." 2-7 Cavalry CO assured Sheikh Abed that CF are working with the IP and judges to review detainee cases and ensure their rights are respected.

The Road Ahead

¶9. (C/REL MCFI) When asked his thoughts on the road ahead, Sheikh Abed advised that our focus should be on children as well as the uneducated and poor upon whom terrorists prey most. He said that 60-80 percent of problems could be fixed if we can find ways to effectively address unemployment and improve the education system. He complained about the GOI's management of the USD 100 million for reconstruction following security operations, and said that assistance should be programmed to provide activities and outlets for citizens from their daily stresses. He added that it is critical that the USG effectively uses the media to educate Maysanis on what we are doing to assist the province.

Comment

¶10. (C/REL MCFI) Sheikh Abed showed plenty of charisma and a secular bent as he warmly engaged his USG guests without the typical requests for project and contract hand-outs. Demonstrating a shrewd sense of American interests, he immediately began discussing his efforts to push the SOFA - without any prompting - after initial pleasantries. Sheikh Abed did not hesitate to provide his frank assessment of the shortcomings of both the provincial and central governments. Citing past mistakes by both the USG and Iraqis, he encouraged the PRT to engage Maysanis at every opportunity. He emphasized repeatedly that Americans must win the hearts and minds of Maysanis, and enthusiastically agreed to regular engagements with both the PRT and CF to check on progress and provide feedback on U.S. engagements with Maysanis.

¶11. (C/REL MCFI) Comment continued: Many of Sheikh Abed's recommendations track closely with U.S. strategies, and he clearly aligned himself - at least in this engagement - with U.S. goals. Given his professed relationships with leaders both in Maysan and in Baghdad, he may prove to be an effective leverage point. The PRT must strive to avoid falling into his cult of personality, and determine where his ulterior motives, if any, lie. End Comment.
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